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*Introductory Addresses on the Science and Art Department
and the South Kensington Museum.*

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No. 6.

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ON

A NATIONAL COLLECTION OF
ARCHITECTURAL ART.

BY

JAMES FERGUSON, Esq., M.R.I.B.A.,

MANAGER OF THE CRYSTAL PALACE, SYDENHAM.

(Delivered on 21st Dec. 1857.)



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AGENTS TO THE SCIENCE AND ART DEPARTMENT OF THE
COMMITTEE OF COUNCIL ON EDUCATION.

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AN ADDRESS,

&c. &c.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

I HAVE, I fear, undertaken a subject which is beset with more difficulties than might at first be suspected. If it were that I had to insist on the advantages of a picture or sculpture gallery, the task would be easy, inasmuch as the reasons for making collections of these objects are so obvious that every Government of Europe has long ago admitted and acted upon them; and not only the great metropolitan cities, but even the capitals of most of the provinces of the great European empires possess collections of these objects more or less extensive or perfect. Few, however, have attempted architectural collections, though an impression is certainly stealing over the public mind that they too are wanting to complete the cycle of the Arts, and that something in this direction must be done before an Art collection is complete.

It is nevertheless true that there is a vast and material distinction between the two classes of objects. Pictures and statues are things complete in themselves, easily removed, and made to be placed

in galleries; while, on the other hand, buildings are made to remain fixed on the spot where they are originally erected, and are of such a scale that they cannot be collected together in any gallery, however large; and it may be objected that a collection of capitals or cornices and fragments or details is like a collection of fingers and toes of sculpture, or eyes and ears out of paintings, and can have no real interest or value either to the architect or to the general public.

I hope, however, to be able to show that this is not a correct view of the matter; but before going further you must allow me to try and explain to you what architecture really is, and to endeavour to present to you a definition of the art which will render the sequel intelligible.

First, then, let me state broadly one fact which requires no proof. It is that up to the age of the Reformation, in the 16th century, every nation of the earth, from the remotest antiquity to that time, had a national style of its own, beautiful in itself, and perfectly appropriated to the wants of the country where it is found, and that the same phenomena still exists in all countries to which European influence has not yet extended.

Since that epoch, we have in Europe followed a different system. With the revival of classical literature we attempted to revive classical art, and all the architecture of Europe down to the end of the last century was an attempt to restore, with more or less minute exactness, the style of the Roman Empire.

It is easy to see how this worked if we compare the literature of England with its architecture,—Chaucer, for instance, is as essentially English as any of the cathedrals or buildings of his day,—such a poem as the *Fairy Queen* of Spenser is the exact counterpart in the admixture of Gothic feelings with classical details as such a building as *Burleigh* or *Nonsuch*. Shakespere's Plays are as classical as *Longleat* or *Wallaton*; English in feeling and original in substance, but mixed with classical forms and details to a bewildering extent. Milton completed the revival, his great poem being as essentially classical as *St. Paul's Cathedral*, both being classical in form, but Christian in reality and purpose. Had we persevered a little longer in this track we might have emancipated our architecture, as we have our literature, from these classical trammels. We were on the point of doing so when at the beginning of this century we were captivated with the exquisite purity and elegance of the Greek style, and seized on it with avidity in the belief that it contained the element that was unsatisfactory in the Roman. We found it, however, far less flexible and less adapted to our purposes, and might have found out from this that all copying was a mistake; but our chains were rivetted by the experiment, and now it is the fashion to decry both these, and to assert that pure Gothic is our national style, and more beautiful and appropriate to our wants than any other. *Crinoline* and correct Gothic are the fashions of the day, and no doubt are very beautiful things in themselves, but, like all fashions, are liable to be carried to

excess; and when this is so, their manifest inconvenience inevitably leads to their abandonment, and a return to common sense, till the mania breaks out again in some new and, perhaps, equally inappropriate form.

Already symptoms of a change are manifesting themselves, inasmuch as some, even of the most enthusiastic advocates of our *national* style, are beginning to copy the bastard Gothic of the Italians; thus abandoning their strongest ground of the style being our own national type; and adopting one as foreign to our wants and feelings as the classical style on whose ruins it arose. If it be once admitted that we may copy Italian Gothic, we are again loose in the sea of styles, and may adopt any one we please, and no doubt we should again have to run through the cycle in which we have been turning for the last three centuries.

But if neither classical nor mediæval forms are architecture, *what is?*

To try and explain this, let me refer to the diagrams. The first division is mere building, in its simplest and most utilitarian form; the second is better, and might be designated, if we had such a word, as "well-building," or engineering; the third has much more pretension to architectural beauty.

The last is so far ornamental, that whether it be good architecture or not, it is still most undoubtedly an object of architectural art; yet, though the floors, the dimensions, and all the arrangements are identical with the first, and indeed differ from it only in a slight grouping of the lateral position of the windows

and the addition of a certain amount of ornament, this is sufficient to make the distinction between an object of fine and one of mere utilitarian art.

The definition, therefore, that we derive from this diagram is that architecture is *ornamental and ornamented construction*; or, to be more explicit, any building, whatever its purpose or whatever its form, may become an object of architecture by a slight rearrangement or grouping of its parts so as to give some evidence of design, and by the addition of ornament may become as purely architectural as we please; all that is required being that the ornament should be beautiful in itself, should be applied with taste, and be appropriate to the purposes of the building. This is all that was done in the most artistic ages of the world, and all that is required to make good architecture now; and if set about in the right manner there is no building, from a pigstye to a palace, that may not be a pleasing object of architectural art, and no form of construction that may not be made an object of beauty.

To take an example of this: In this diagram I have a style of construction that excited the indignation of some of my architectural friends to no small extent. "Here," they said, "is a man who is so conscious of the flimsiness of his construction that he begins to shore up his walls before he dares to put the roof on." And so it certainly is; but in principle it is identical with that adopted in every mediæval cathedral in Europe. If analysed nothing can be more monstrous than the stone shores which prop up every aisle and roof, and nothing more un-

graceful than this acknowledged type of instability. Yet we all know into what forms of beauty the architects of the middle ages wrought their flying buttresses, and how pleasing their effect is at Amiens, Cologne, and our own Henry VII.'s Chapel.

If the "shores" of the Bermondsey warehouses were trussed and carved, and ornamented, as they might easily be, they might be made as beautiful in themselves as the trusses in the roof of Westminster Hall; and if they were applied to a hall built wholly of wood, they would be not only the most appropriate, but, so far as I know, the only mode of acquiring the requisite stability without encroaching on the internal space; and there is no reason whatever against their being applied, even to the most ornamental buildings.

In fact, there is no reason why wood should not be used as well as stone and iron. All that is required is, that wood should be used with carpentry forms, stone with masonic, and iron as the founder or forger thinks most appropriate. Each is excellent when used in its proper place, and so as to tell its own story; but each is bad when used with the forms or applied to the purposes of the others. And plaster, too, is a most excellent architectural material when used for itself though a detestable one when used either for stone or any other material.

But granting all this, and few would be inclined to deny it, we only now approach the great difficulty of the question, which is, what forms or what style of ornament we are to apply.

In the abstract it is easy to reply that ornaments

are valuable in direct proportion, first, to the quantity, and then to the quality of the thought invested in them. The Corinthian order, for instance, has the thoughts of hundreds, perhaps of thousands of minds invested in it, and those of the highest quality, and in the best age of the artistic world. The Gothic arch has, perhaps, an equal quantity of thought invested in it, but it belongs to a less artistic age, and though bold and picturesque in the highest degree, its quality is certainly not equal to that of the classical school.

Of all styles, that known as the Grecian Doric is perhaps the one most remarkable for the quality of the thought invested in it; but it was practised for so short a time that the quantity was insufficient to bring it to perfection, as is evidenced by the wooden forms which still disfigure its design and limit its flexibility. Had the Greeks persevered a few centuries longer in its use, it would have become the most perfect of all. But it was too pure for the Romans, and was left in the incomplete state we now find it in.

The Modern Italian is an immense inheritance of rich fragments, which have never been worked together sufficiently to make a complete style out of them.

All this, however, does not answer the question further than to show that we cannot and must not neglect the investment of thought that we have inherited, but must base our proceedings on what has been done before our time. We must commence from some established starting point, and the ques-

tion is, from what point shall we set out in search of a new style suited to our wants?

If you ask one section of our architects, and that perhaps the most enthusiastic, certainly the most energetic, they reply instantly—"Pure Gothic" is our national style, and the only one that combines beauty with appropriateness to our wants and climate; but another, an older, and more experienced section point in triumph to the superior elegance and purity of classical details, and can point to innumerable instance of that style being made to bend without violence to the varied exigences of modern life.

There is still a third class who repudiate both, and boldly assert that we ought not to copy either classic or Gothic styles, but like all other nations have a style of our own, appropriate to our feelings and wants, and to them only.

These last are, no doubt, right in theory, but they are hardly aware of the difficulty of reducing their principles to practice, in fact, how nearly impossible it is, when we bear in mind, the ignorance and impatience of the public in these matters.

To explain how difficult the invention of a new style is, let me refer to the history of such an object for instance as the Corinthian capital. Its invention is certainly due to the Egyptians at least 1,000 years before Christ. It was thence imported into Greece, and they adapted to it their own beautiful acanthus, first using it with a water leaf, then with miniature Ionic volutes, but never attaining a perfectly balanced capital. That was reserved for the Romans, who by

employing Greek artists, and basing their endeavours on the experience of their predecessors, at last produced the capital known as that of the Temple of Jupiter Stator.

It thus took these nations more than 1,000 years to arrive at this point; and of these the last 300 were the most active and best directed in an artistic point of view, of any that have occurred before or since.

So, too, it was with the Gothic pier and arch. Based on Roman experience, the Christians early commenced to try to invent something more appropriate to their purpose, and after 1,000 years of earnest and uninterrupted progress, they at last succeeded in wholly emancipating themselves from former styles, and in creating that exquisite and beautiful combination of parts which is now enthralling the greater part of our architects; but this was not accomplished by one man or one set of men, nor at one period, nor indeed in one country; but by slow, steady, and persevering efforts continued by generation after generation steadily progressing, and with a well-defined view through ten centuries of time. During the greatest part of this period, the art was not confined to builders or architects, but statesmen and priests, the poet, the man of science, and man of learning, worked hand in hand with the builder and the stonemason to produce the great result. They went to work in the only way in which a great success was ever achieved by mankind, and the only way in which man will ever succeed in this, or in anything else that is worth our while trying after.

The one question that remains is, Can we do this now? Can we shake off our allegiance to the Gothic and classical styles, and begin *de novo*, and work on steadily and progressively for years till we create a new style for ourselves?

It is easy to answer to this, that unless we do so our style is a plaything for the antiquary and the archæologist, and not for the true architect, and never will either really interest the nation or be worthy of it, or of our civilization; and it is easy to add that the first and most important thing to enable us to do this is a more general diffusion of knowledge with reference to the forms of art that have gone before, and a more correct appreciation of its aim and object.

And this brings me really to the subject of this lecture, namely, the means by which this knowledge may be best attained and diffused; for it will not suffice that architects or archæologists should be correctly informed on these matters, the information must be diffused through all classes; and all must lend a hand, either by influence or by practice, to inaugurate this great regeneration of art.

If not the only means, certainly one of the very best, is the institution of architectural museums, provided, of course, that they are established on cosmopolitan and scientific principles, and so as really to fulfil the object for which they are intended.

I am aware that professional architects are sometimes inclined to overlook or despise the advantages to be derived from these museums, as they have passed the stage of instruction at which they are

most useful. Most architects travel in their youth, and study the more important buildings of the world on the spot, and they become familiar with plans and sections and drawings of details; all of which tell to them a clearer story and enable them to realize a building more perfectly than any cast or moulding or model can do. Such a plate, for instance, as the diagram of the mouldings of Heckington Church is the delight of the professional architect; but not one unprofessional person in a hundred can comprehend what it is all about, whilst a cast of one of those mouldings would at once tell a story which all could judge of, and whose beauties and defects all could appreciate. Few, however, except those destined for the architectural profession have the advantage of scientific travel in their youth, and fewer still have leisure in after life to master the technicalities of art, and to make themselves so familiar with the secrets of the craft as to be able to derive either pleasure or instruction from the technical modes of expression which are indispensable for the conveyance of really scientific knowledge. The consequence is that architecture has become the privilege and the exclusive property of a small and limited class of persons, and has consequently been narrowed into the reproduction of some technical or archæological form of art, rather than becoming the expression of the nation's wants and feelings, which is the only form in which it can be worthy of the nation's care, or of the attention of any man of true intellect or real artistic feeling.

So far as I can see, there is no institution so likely

to forward this most desirable object as the establishment of an architectural museum on a proper scale, and with such means and appliances as are now available to the purpose; and if established on a sufficiently broad basis and carried out with a proper cosmopolitan liberality of feeling, it must most materially contribute to the attainment of an object which all lovers of art so earnestly desire.

As in most instances, the French have perceived the desirability of this object before we were even well aware of its importance; and in the collections at the Palais des Beaux Arts and at the Hôtel de Cluny, a foundation has been laid for the purpose. The latter, however, can hardly be called a strictly architectural collection, and the other has not yet received that development which must entitle it to a high rank in this *specialité*.

Among ourselves, one of the earliest attempts was that of Sir John Soane, who brought together in his private residence in Lincoln's Inn Fields, a very extensive collection of architectural casts and illustrations, and built for them a gallery, which is certainly about the best thing of the kind that has yet been done; though its effect, it must be confessed, is somewhat marred by the quirks and quiddities which he indulged in, in carrying out his architectural designs. This collection he left to the nation, and though he encumbered the gift as he did the style with incongruities which have considerably marred its usefulness, it is still well worthy of a visit from all, and should be most attentively studied by anyone who proposes to do anything in the same direction.

Other private collections have been made, perhaps as extensive and useful as this, but they have been dispersed, and therefore need not now be referred to. It was principally out of the débris of that of Mr. Cottingham that the Architectural Museum in Cannon Row arose, and as far as it went this was a step entirely in the right direction, but like the parent institution it was too exclusively mediæval to perform, even in a limited degree, the functions of an institution to improve the taste of the nation, though, located as it now is under the same roof with the other collections of this Department, it assumes a character of usefulness it never could have attained in its original locality.

The next great public effort that was made was at the Crystal Palace, and in its peculiar line of restoration it is by far the most complete and perfect that has ever yet been attempted. No one is less inclined than I am to find fault with what has been done there. It has filled a great void in the most perfect manner, and supplied *a* great want, though not exactly *the* want which was most particularly felt by the student of architectural art.

When the various casts and models were first brought to the Palace, and were arranged and labelled on the shelves of the workshops—the capitals in one place, the pinnacles, the mouldings, the foliage, the canopies, &c., each in its own class and according to its date, they were far more interesting to the student, and conveyed far more information, than they do now that they are pieced into a modern design and all made to fit each other and toned

together so as to lose the greater part of their own distinctive individuality. By reference to the Handbooks, it is true, you may disintegrate the greater part of the design, and if you can forget the colour and the repairs and restorations, truth may be arrived at at last. But this is a painful, painstaking process, and the very reverse of what is wanted. Where architecture is the main object, truth ought to be presented in its simplest and purest form, and the facts conveyed in the most direct manner to the mind of the student. The process followed in the Crystal Palace is something like transposing the problems of Euclid into lyric verse, or teaching theology by means of the religious novel. There are some minds which can only be approached by having their wholesome food so clogged with sweetness or so savored with spices as almost to destroy its nutritious qualities, and it is well to provide instruction even for these; but the wholesome and real learning which will fructify to good is that which is conveyed in its most unsophisticated form and without any artificial stimulants whatever.

Notwithstanding this, there is no doubt but that the Architectural Courts at the Crystal Palace have done a great deal of good in awakening attention to the subject, and thus conveyed to many an amount of instruction they never would have imbibed had it not been presented to them in the enchanting form which it wears under the crystal roof at Sydenham. Besides this the Alhambra Court and the Pompeian House are reproductions so complete and perfect as to give the best possible idea of the two objects they

represent, and a far better idea of the two styles than can be obtained by any other means, except a visit to the places themselves; and the other Courts, though not reproductions, are most pleasing reminiscences of the various styles whose names they bear.

Though this has therefore been done, and so well done, there still remains the want of a more scientific museum, which ought perhaps to have preceded, but must now be considered as the complement to this, and together they will enable us to boast of having a more complete illustration of architectural art than any nation of Europe.

The museum which I am now referring to ought in the first place, to consist of a collection of casts of architectural ornaments, not only of one style but of every style of art, certainly not every ornament, but only a selection of the best, and of those most typical of the style. Colour should never be introduced except where it now actually exists, and only to that extent. I need hardly add that they must be arranged chronologically, and in such distinct groups as to prevent any confusion amongst them. This will form, so to express it, the only full-sized or original part of the Museum. But if the collection stopped here, however interesting it might be to the architect or stone carver, it would be of little use to the general student, and models of the entire buildings, or at least of those parts to which the ornaments belong, must be supplied; for no architectural detail is of any value except with reference to the purpose for which it is used, or its appropriateness to the place where it is found. Where models

are not attainable, drawings, and especially photographs, must form part of the collection. From its accuracy and truthfulness the latter forms a most invaluable adjunct to such a museum as this, and supplies a desideratum which a few years ago was practically unattainable, but without which such a collection would lose one half its value.

One further adjunct is required, which is a good Architectural Library. With these the student of the fine art architecture may master the subject. He may see what form in art is most pure and elegant in itself; and from all being reduced to a common denominator—the plain unvarnished plaster cast—his judgment will not be biassed by the religious enthusiasm so inseparable from the precincts of a cathedral, or by the stirring associations which surround the Forum or Capitol of Rome. He will be able to form his own judgment, not only as to the intrinsic beauty, but also as to the appropriateness of any particular style; and this, as I have already explained, is the true province of the architect in his quality of artist.

But, as I have also attempted to explain, there still remains the more material but equally essential qualification of “good building,” and the application of common sense to the arrangement and construction of buildings; and a National Museum would not be complete without also comprehending this great department. This should consist of a selection of the best building materials, with such information as may be admissible with regard to their properties, and more especially of any new inventions, or new appli-

cations of older forms; and this again, like the fine art branch, should be accompanied by models of roofs, floors, foundations, and other difficult parts of construction, more especially those which are of importance in a sanitary or fire-proof point of view. These two great divisions, placed side by side, would convey a mass of information which has never yet been accessible to the public, and convey it in a form which all could comprehend and make use of.

I need hardly add, that such a museum as I have been speaking of, could hardly be attempted by any private individual or association. The Institute of British Architects, it is true, possesses a fair library, a few ornamental casts, some models, and a few specimens of building materials. The collection, however, is far too small to be considered as a representation of the art, and there is no hope of their ever being able to extend it so as to make it generally useful or interesting to the public, for the simple reason that it would never pay.

Numbers may be attracted by the pleasing pictures of the Crystal Palace, but the votaries of plain unvarnished truth are too few to make a paying public, and in the present state of society and of feeling towards architectural art, people are by no means inclined to take much trouble, still less to pay for such information as such a museum would afford, and it is only a Government that can do it, and they must look to the improvement in taste and general diffusion of knowledge for their reward, and certainly not to the pecuniary success of the undertaking.

This I am afraid is only too forcibly illustrated by the history of the Architectural Museum in Cannon Row. No men could be more enthusiastic than those who set it on foot, none could have worked more earnestly, and funds were subscribed with a liberality which is not often obtainable for such institutions. But notwithstanding all this, it could hardly have gone on much longer without Government aid; which was supplied in this instance, by affording it a habitation under this roof. During its brief existence elsewhere, a very large and interesting collection of casts was got together, but owing to the tastes and feelings of its principal supporters, almost exclusively derived from mediæval art. In itself, this collection, though useful and valuable can only be considered as a fragment of what a National Museum must eventually become. Placed where it now is, its value is immensely increased, for besides this, there is a collection of models prepared for Mr. Nash, brought from Hampton Court, and a still more valuable collection of models of the works of Sir Christopher Wren, brought from St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey, and a variety of miscellaneous specimens, which only require completing, and the gaps filling in to make this department a reality, and a potent means of conveying instruction of the best class.

In the building department also a great deal has been done. Numerous specimens of bricks and terracotta of various forms and adapted to various purposes have already been brought together, and the collection of models is rapidly increasing; so that in

every point of view the work may be said to be fairly in hand, and with the energy displayed in every department of this institution, and the means at their disposal, there can be no doubt but that an Architectural Museum will shortly be brought together on a scale worthy of the nation.

All that is now wanted is a well digested scheme, and the exercise of a sound discretion in regard to what should be admitted and what rejected. An "omnium gatherum" of every sort of thing would not only be useless, but would defeat its own object, by rendering the search after any peculiarity or point of information so fatiguing that few would attempt it; besides that it would take up such a space that the scheme would break down under the immensity of its own requirements.

It would be tedious, if it were possible (which I very much doubt), to attempt to sketch out such a scheme in a single lecture. The great guiding principle should be that nothing should be admitted to the Fine Art Department but what is conducive to the diffusion of a correct knowledge of architectural art, and to the general improvement of taste in these matters; and nothing into the more utilitarian department which is not conducive to a sound knowledge of construction, or promises to be advantageous in a utilitarian point of view.

If these principles are kept in view, selection carefully applied, and rejection sternly enforced, among the thousands of specimens which are sure to be offered to an institution like this, it is almost

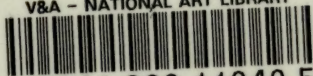
impossible but that in a few years we must have a museum of architectural art worthy of the nation; and if the Government will only support it as they ought to do, they will, through the medium of one of the most important of the Fine Arts, do more to improve and elevate the taste of the people of England than by any other means which, so far as I know, are at present available for the purpose.

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